

MONUMENTS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF POLITICAL POWER
CASE STUDY: HUMAYUN'S TOMB, NEW DELHI.

The Humayun's tomb was built in 1561 in Delhi by Humayun's successor (perhaps the greatest Mughal emperor of India) Akbar. It is a massive red sandstone and white marble structure, resting on a large plinth and made up of 56 cells containing numerous gravestones, set in the middle of an elaborate garden setting. A double dome resting on a high drum caps it, and the gardens are marked with cross-axial pathways, waterways and pools. In the contemporary context, it is a national monument that lies just within the urban expanse of New Delhi.

This essay introduces Humayun's tomb as a case study for exploring how monuments construct political power not only in the time they are built in but also later through their appropriation by changing political forces. The chosen case study is a building that is considered one of the finest examples of tomb architecture in the Islamic building tradition. More famous as the architectural prototype of the Taj Mahal, it has gained renewed importance in the recent past through its designation as a World Heritage Site in 1993. The paper will explore how memories associated with a monument can be selectively reactivated at different stages in the life of a building and the politics of these processes.

To limit the scope of the final paper, the case study will evaluate the establishment of only political power through the appropriation of the building. I have chosen to discuss three moments in the life of the building to present this argument:

- 1) The 'original' time of the building when it was built in 1561
- 2) Colonial preservation efforts of the ASI under the aegis of the British imperial powers
- 3) Its modern designation as a World Heritage Site.

This essay introduces the 'initial' moment of the building at the time of its construction and the process by which selective memories were associated with the structure to establish and consolidate the political status of the patron, Akbar.

Location and site surroundings:

The tomb is situated on a flat stretch of land on the outskirts of urban Delhi today. Historically, the site was located next to the banks of the river Yamuna, surrounded by numerous sultanate and Mughal monuments but outside the urban realm of Mughal Delhi. The rubble walls of the city of *Din-Panah* built by Humayun in 1533 are 1500 meters to the north. Barely 600 meters to the west is the *dargah* and village settlement of Nizamuddin Auliya (one of the most revered *Chisti* sufi-saint of India).¹

The location of the tomb in that particular site opens the discussion of constructing political power through monuments. It is my contention that the tomb was located in that particular site primarily due to two factors- 1) its proximity to the first Mughal city built by Humayun in Delhi, and more importantly 2) its proximity to the famous Auliya tomb so that it could draw upon the religious significance of the buried person and establish an association with Humayun and indirectly to Akbar, its patron. It has been recorded by numerous court scholars that the tomb and the *dargah* remained an important part of Akbar's imperial visits to the city throughout his reign and this established a precedent of *ziyarat*² in connection to the tomb that was emulated in various degrees by most of his successors. These pilgrimage visits helped in establishing the special religious significance attributed to the tomb and its contribution to the political image of the ruler.³ I shall be exploring the political implications of these imperial visits in greater detail in the paper.

Patronage:

The most striking visual feature of the tomb is its size and its garden setting. In terms of both these features, the tomb established an unprecedented example in Indian Islamic architecture. Such tombs had existed elsewhere in the Islamic world, but not previously in India. In building such a remarkable monument, Akbar (to whom the patronage of the building is attributed), provided the city of Delhi with a visual and religious signifier. It is important to note that the mausoleum was not built immediately after the death of Humayun in 1556. It was begun in 1561 and the intermediate period was one of great political turmoil and expansion of the Islamic empire. This time also saw the change in a number of policies of state. This included Akbar's marriage to Hindu princesses and the revocation of the *jizya*⁴.

¹ Akbar is known to have been a firm disciple of the *Chisti* tradition of Sufism, of which Nizamuddin Auliya was a noted religious figure.

² Loosely translated, '*ziyarat*' means the act or place of performing pilgrimage.

³ The recorded imperial visits by Akbar and successive Mughal rulers has been studied and discussed in detail by Ebba Koch.

⁴ *Jizya* was the discriminatory poll tax imposed on the people of the state outside of the Islamic faith. Akbar abolished this tax during his reign and in doing so established the rudiments of what later became a very secular and tolerant Islamic empire.

The building can therefore be considered a memorial to the expansion and the establishment of the vast Mughal Empire in India, a symbol of a vision of kingship and an affirmation of the Mughal power and permanence in India. Through its particular aesthetic articulation, it can also be considered as embodiment of the secular principles promoted by Akbar. Some of these, particularly the absence of Quranic calligraphy, are discussed later in the paper. Hence, we see that the physical form taken by the monument was in certain ways a product of the political environment of the time and reciprocally it was a true expression of the political scenario of the times.

It has been argued by some scholars that the building was actually built under the patronage of Humayun's widow, Haji begum. But this has been proven incorrect by later studies, as well as the physical evidence of the building itself.⁵ A monument of this stature and significance can only be attributed to Akbar, who alone would have had the resources for its construction and its fashioning in that particular architectural/aesthetic manner.

Form and meaning:

One of the eye-catching features of the tomb is its raised plinth that is the cause of its visibility on the city skyline today. But historically its importance lay in the 56 cells housed within that raised plinth and that were used as the burial place of almost 100 royal descendants and relatives. By making the tomb a large structure that could house innumerable royal dignitaries etc, Akbar added another dimension of meaning to the structure as a tomb. For not only did the tomb become the resting place of Humayun, it became a dynastic center of sorts. Akbar's need to associate himself with not only his father but also the entire royal family was to strengthen his legality as the true descendant to the Mughal Empire in India.

The built form of the building (especially the dome), though apparently derived from existing *Sultanate* and *Timurid* examples, is distinct from either. It attempts to fuse together the formal aspects of both these types. By doing so he established a link as the successor to the glorious Timurid's of Iran as well as the Islamic empire in India. The use of red sandstone with white marble is a reference to the previous architecture of the Delhi Sultanate and places the building as a logical continuation in the same tradition.⁶

⁵ For details about the assumption of Akbar as true patron of the tomb, refer to the arguments in Glenn D.Lowry, "Humayun's Tomb: Form, Function, and Meaning in Early Mughal Architecture," *Muqarnas IV: An Annual on Islamic Art and Architecture 1987* (Oleg Grabar, ed. Leiden: E.J. Brill).

⁶ For details about the Islamic building tradition in India till that time, refer to James Frergusson, *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*, vol. 2 (1876; reprint New Delhi, 1972); Percy Brown, *Indian Architecture: Islamic Period* (1942; reprint Bombay, 1956); Andreas Volwahsen, *Living architecture: Islamic Indian* (New York, 1970)

The built form of the tomb also incorporates certain subtle messages through exclusion of previously prevalent building and architectural features. The most important of these is the absence of any form of calligraphy on the surface of the building. All previous examples of the Islamic tomb type in India had been profuse with the occurrence of sculpted calligraphy in stone (regarded as one of the finest achievements by the Indian craftsmen, later also found in the Taj), but in this particular building that is missing, almost as if he was attempting to create a secular building. The ornamentation and surface relief is profuse with geometric patterns.

It is an attempt to create a visual order rather than the creation of verbal associations that would have been limited in the audience they addressed. The need to make these forms comprehensible explains the extremely conservative decorations, when compared to previous examples. Stucco and inlaid stone, the prevalent modes are used exceedingly sparingly when compared to the previous examples of Timurid and Sultanate architecture. The implication of this break from tradition is profound. Akbar was aware that he was the ruler of a vast population, the majority of which was non-Muslim and had resisted conversion. This population also paid a higher rate of tax to the state. Through a removal of *jizya* he attempted to mollify the concerns of the non-Muslims and managed to establish an integrated kingdom. It is these political values that the building embodies.

The Humayun's Tomb, to a large extent, reflects Akbar's attempts to articulate both the range and the scope of his empire, while at the same time defining his personal associations and aspirations. It attests to the emperor's keen interest in his political past and the awareness of the prestige associated with the most dramatic symbols of cultural sophistication. Through these different physical signifiers, the building and its environs seek to establish a visual imagery of political meaning that is direct and easily understood.

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